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COUNTRY Indochina

25X SUBJECT Preparations for a Showdown at Dien Bien Phu

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THIS IS UNEVALUATED INFORMATION

1. Interest, both military and civilian, is now centered at Dien Bien Phu, the great French fortress in northern Laos, where a great battle is being prepared. The French General Staff maintains two hypotheses concerning the purpose of the large concentration of Vietminh forces in this sector:
 - a. To isolate and paralyze this French fortress while the major part of the Vietminh forces bypasses Dien Bien Phu in a rapid advance on Luang Prabang, the capital of Laos; or
 - b. To launch the entire Vietminh force against this fortress and to overrun it in a decisive battle.
2. The Communist General, Vo Nguyen Giap, has made the most careful preparations in building up his fighting forces to a maximum strength. The French General Staff therefore expects this attack to become the most violent one in this war. The French have concentrated their best available troops and strongest arms in and around the fortress. Their General Staff is apparently optimistic, yet the outcome of the battle in the offing seems rather uncertain to the neutral experts. Following his expensive experience at Nasam, Vo Nguyen Giap is aware of the risks he is now taking and will probably provide all the factors needed for victory before he decides to launch his offensive. He has the initiative and he may choose his own time, since there is nothing to force him to seek an urgent solution. He also may choose to bypass Dien Bien Phu, should an assault on that fortress appear to him as too costly or inconclusive.

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3. The Vietminh has completed a very large concentration of its forces against Dien Bien Phu. Several battalions, belonging to three different divisions, some 20 thousand men, have been assembled in this area. They are supported by three AA battalions, and one artillery regiment. For the first time in eight years of war, the Communist General Staff has accepted the calculated risk of leaving its vital bases in the north Tonkin Delta unguarded. They have left behind only regional battalions protected by a dense intelligence net. Most of their troops, including the best ones, are now at Dien Bien Phu. A vast supply line has also been organized by requisitioning 40 thousand coolies from among the population and sending there some 300 trucks, which in the last month have been piling up stocks of food and ammunition in the vicinity of Dien Bien Phu. In spite of almost daily air raids, this traffic could not be stopped. The food convoys have been coming directly from Yunnan in Communist China, where large stocks of materiel have been amassed. Finally, in the entire region around Dien Bien Phu the maquis, which the French Command had organized, has been cleaned up by the Red troops. (They were ordered by the French to disperse and then to join, in small groups, the forces in the Dien Bien Phu fortress.)
4. In spite of the reconquest of Thakek, all danger to central Laos has not been eliminated by the French counteroffensive. The rebel battalions, although badly mauled (one and one-half battalions have been lost) are still able to start an offensive against Vientiane, particularly should the Vietminh forces bypass Dien Bien Phu and march on Luang Prabang. At present the Vietminh forces, are being regrouped in central Laos, and their depleted foodstocks have been replenished with 300 tons of food, which they took at Thakek. These troops have also been assigned the political task of disintegrating all resistance in central Laos by propaganda work among the population. It seems that this had been the main purpose of the offensive against Thakek; the capture of that town may not even have been planned at first. The unexpected loss of Thakek proved extremely costly for the French who lost a large amount of war material there. The brand-new American machine guns had to be destroyed by fire, since there was no time for shipping them away. The Vietminh troops have also captured enough material to clothe and feed themselves for many months.
5. While the French lines of communication between northern and southern Laos are being restored, General Navarre has started an unexpected offensive against the Vietminh in the central zone of Vietnam, extending from Nhatrang to Tourane. Military experts generally disapprove of this decision since this operation, even if completely successful, will only attain gains in a sector of secondary importance. It is an offensive which needs a long period of time and is directed against an area where the Vietminh has no important bases to lose. The French forces sent into this area will have to stay there for at least six months, while the Vietminh may withdraw into the mountains bordering the coastline from where they may continue their harassing attacks for almost any length of time.
6. Unbiased observers note that recent military moves on both sides indicate an intent of assuring themselves favorable positions in case negotiations for an armistice are started. Ho Chi Minh is trying to establish himself firmly north of the 16 parallel, including northern Laos, while the French-Vietnam forces are

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improving their security in the south by occupying an enemy enclave, easy to take, in their own area. This political intent could explain the recent tactics of both sides which militarily do not seem reasonable. The French General Staff denies such intent and emphasizes that they are seeking rapid successes, even if they be only temporary, in order to prevent the idea of negotiations with the enemy gaining support.

7. Whatever the French military plans are, the idea of armistice negotiations to start soon, has spread in Vietnamese political circles and has caused the Cao daists to react strongly against it. This sect has published a letter which it sent to the French Minister, Jacquet, who is at present in Indochina, to warn the French authorities that the Cao daists were definitely opposed to any negotiations with the Communists, and that in case of such negotiations, they would join the maquis and also establish themselves in the Philippines, where, with American aid, they would establish an anti-Communist government for liberation.
8. It seems that a French emissary, [] has made contact with a Vietminh 25X1 emissary to explore the chances of eventual armistice negotiations, but nothing is known about the result of these contacts. To judge by the optimism of the French General Staff, the idea of negotiating an armistice has been put off without, however, having been abandoned. On the other hand, Ho Chi Minh is certainly not forced to negotiate an armistice. His military potential is intact. Quite recently he started to use more powerful and dangerous arms in the guerrilla-infested Tonkin Delta: land mines more powerful than any heretofore known, and almost impossible to detect. These mines have been supplied by the Chinese Communists, and they are capable of pulverizing even a tank. Mines are being used now in the Tonkin Delta to a far greater extent than heretofore. Military and civilian trucks and cars are being destroyed in large numbers, and serious losses in human lives have also been suffered. In central and southern Vietnam, guerrilla fighting has also been increased. Several trains have been blown up recently on the lines Hue-Tourane and Hue-Quang Tri. In the south, a cyclist contest, called the Tour of Southern Vietnam, had to be cancelled since, immediately after the start, terrorist actions interfered with the tour. There is a constant Communist effort to increase the fighting quality of the partisans in central Vietnam, while in the south, they are also able to organize minor operations against outposts and smaller fortified areas.
9. Chinese material aid has been considerably increased in recent weeks. It includes some heavy material: 105 caliber guns, AA batteries, and special fuel for Molotov trucks. Intelligence agents have also been recruited recently in large numbers; some Communist agents had become too well known and had to be replaced.

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